

## **ELIZABETH CLOVIS LANGE, c 1784-1882**

### **Black Religious Leader**

**ELAINE G. BRESLAW**

**and**

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On July 2, 1828, in a house on Richmond Street in Baltimore, the religious congregation now known as the Oblate Sisters of Providence officially began, the first black Roman Catholic order in the United States. Very little is known about the birth and early life of its founder and superior general, Elizabeth Clovis Lange. She was probably born in Cuba, some believe in Santiago. Her mother, Annette Lange, was the natural daughter to Mardoche Lange, a Jewish plantation owner in Jeremie, Haiti. Her father, Clovis, carried the same family name of Lange and probably was a former slave of Mardoche Lange. Clovis and Annette Lange emigrated to Cuba from Haiti sometime before the Haitian revolution led by the Negro general Toussaint rOuverture.

Where and under what circumstances the young Elizabeth received her education is also a mystery, but her later activities as a teacher indicate that her training was more than adequate. For some reason, not clear, Annette Lange with her daughter, Elizabeth, left Cuba to come to the United States. Clovis Lange did not come with them. They landed in Charleston, South Carolina, where they stayed for a short time before moving on to Norfolk, Virginia, and finally to Baltimore. Annette Lange soon returned to the West Indies, but Elizabeth, now a mature woman, remained in Baltimore.

Baltimore's French-speaking peoples were refugees from the French Revolution, coming either from France or from the French island possessions in the West Indies. Most of those coming from the West Indies had fled from the cruel treatment of both whites and mulattoes by l'Ouverture's forces. By July 1793, some 1,500 Haitians, of whom 500 were black, had poured into Baltimore settling in the Fells Point area. Among the so-called "colored" emigres were some who were free, educated and wealthy, but there were also

many more who were less fortunate free blacks and some who had been slaves.

The nucleus of religious activity for Haitians, both black and white, was St. Mary's Seminary Chapel established by the Sulpicians, themselves emigres from revolutionary France. This French-speaking, bi-racial group easily and naturally maintained its separate identity in Baltimore. At the time of Elizabeth Lange's arrival in the early 1820's, the Sulpician Chapel was still the center for religious activity for their descendents.

Elizabeth Lange found that there was no public education provided for black children in Baltimore. Unlike other southern states, Maryland did not have a law prohibiting the education of Negroes; but neither was education for them encouraged by local officials. There were some small schools for black children operated by Protestant groups, but there was little being done to educate Catholic Negro children, especially those of the French-speaking population. So Elizabeth Lange opened a school for Negro girls in her home with the assistance of a Haitian refugee, Marie Magdalene Balas. What year that was is unknown, but Elizabeth was forced to close her school in 1827 because of inadequate funds.

In casting around for some means of supporting a school for black children, she turned to the Sulpician fathers. She confided in Father James Hector Joubert who was familiar with the problems of the children, having taught catechism class to them and having been appalled at their low level of learning. Now he and Elizabeth Lange agreed on the need for taking steps to improve markedly the education of these children.

In addition, Miss Lange desired to become a member of a religious order but she knew that the existing orders took only white women as members. She and Father Joubert, himself a white refugee from Santo Domingo, agreed it would be necessary to establish a new and separate order for black women. The advantages seemed obvious to both of them. First, it would open up opportunities for Negro women who desired a religious life. Then it would allow some of those women to become teachers at a time when vocational opportunities for both black and white women were restricted, much more so for blacks than for whites. Through such an order, a continuing supply of teachers could be trained to teach the Negro children in schools supported by the Catholic Church, staffed by the new religious order.

The approval of the Archbishop of Baltimore was necessary before a new religious order could be founded, and that proved to be no obstacle. Archbishop Whitfield gave his enthusiastic consent and did a lot to calm Miss Lange's fears that some white people might be offended to see Negro women in religious habits. Raising money for a new school also was not as difficult as Miss Lange had feared. Funds for the venture were raised among the members of the black community in Baltimore with the help of a wealthy black woman, Mrs. Charles Arieu. Additional funds were raised by Mrs. Ann-Catherine Ducatel and Mrs. Jeanne-Marie Chatard, two wealthy white women who were refugees from Haiti.

Miss Lange was joined in her ventures by two friends, Marie Magdalene Balas and Rosine Boegue, and their novitiate began on June 13, 1828. Elizabeth Lange was named the Superior.

As they began their preparations for taking their religious vows, the three women established a school "for colored children" in a rented house "on the corner of the alley of the [Sulpician] Seminary, near Paca Street."

At first all the students were French speaking, but they came from various social backgrounds. Three of the boarders were orphans. Their skin color ranged from the very dark to the very light. Very light-skinned was Almaide Duchemin, a blonde, blue-eyed, illegitimate daughter of an English father and a light-skinned Haitian Negro mother. The mother, Betsy Duchemin, whose real name was Marie Anne Maxis, had taken the name of a French refugee family that had brought her to Baltimore in 1793. Almeide was born in 1810, and first attended Mother Seton's new school in Emmitsburg, but then came to Miss Lange's in 1828 with the intention of joining the new order. Elizabeth encouraged her interests, and as Sister M. Theresa, she became the fourth novitiate.

By the end of 1828, the school was moved to larger and more comfortable quarters on Richmond Street. Once the school had moved away from the immediate physical presence of the Sulpicians, Sister Mary Lange's worst fears were realized as they began to face growing opposition from the community. The landlord of the Richmond Street house, a Mr. Huffman, notified his tenants that he had new plans for his property at the end of their one-year lease, and they would have to leave. Other houses in the vicinity suddenly acquired very high rents. As the time for their first vows grew near, the four women were busily engaged in finding new patrons. In a story that has all the elements of a melodrama, Dr. Chatard, husband of the first benefactor, appeared at the right moment and offered to sell them a house on Pennsylvania Avenue on very liberal terms.

Thus, as they took their first vows on July 2, 1829, Sisters Mary, Marie Francis, Mary Rose and M. Theresa could look forward to a more secure and permanent location for their school. In the fall they gave their new school a name, Saint Frances Academy. It was truly "a pioneer in the field of education in Baltimore for neglected colored children," and earliest teacher training institute in Baltimore for black women.

Sister Mary Lange's talents as a teacher and administrator began to attract women from outside of Maryland. Among the first to join the Oblate Sisters of Providence were members of the Noel family of Wilmington, Delaware. They, too, were descendants of Haitian refugees. Although the congregation continued to be bilingual, the first American sister, Marie Anne Barclay, was admitted into the order in 1830, and she also was the first sister to be accepted without a dowry. The pupils, many of whom became novices, included orphans taken in by the order and former slaves. The rules of the community, however, did not permit anyone to enter while there was any "claim of ownership against her person." The Oblates would offer no haven

for runaways. Considering that Sister Mary's most important benefactors were slave owners, to have followed a different policy was unthinkable.

During the summer of 1832, a cholera epidemic broke out in Baltimore, and the Bureau of the Poor appealed to local religious orders for nurses to minister to the sick in the almshouse. Although the Oblate Sisters were a teaching order and were not obligated to care for the sick, Sister Mary Lange, the Superior at the time, permitted four volunteers to help. All returned alive. But the foundress had good reason to feel chagrined afterwards because no official thanks were ever tendered to the Oblates even though the Sisters of Charity, a white nursing order, did receive public recognition for their efforts.

Sister Mary served as Superior General of the Order from its beginning to 1832. She was reelected in 1835 and again in 1838 for three-year terms. During those early years, she played the major role in establishing educational programs and charting the direction of future growth. From 1841 until her death 41 years later, she continued to teach, even though between 1845 and 1849 she also served as housekeeper at the Sulpician Seminary near her school's first home on Paca Street. During the Civil War from 1863 to 1866 she took on the added burden of local superior of Saint Benedict's School of Fell's Point, one of the many institutions established by the Oblates in response to the needs of children.

A legacy in the amount of \$1,411.59 from her father, Clovis Lange, who died in Cuba in 1833, enabled her to endow the Order with additional funds. At the same time she asked that her aged mother, who had returned to Cuba, be given a home in the Oblates' house. Annette Lange arrived in 1836 to be reunited with her daughter and to add a gayer note to the often somber atmosphere of the Oblates. The elderly Mrs. Lange, known as "Dede," admitted to being awed by her daughter's seriousness and was ill at ease in the presence of the Sisters' self-abnegation. Nonetheless, there is no record of overt friction between the two during the short time they had together.

Part of the depressing atmosphere of the Oblates' house on Richmond Street was due to the lack of space. The classroom served as a community room, sewing room, the place for ironing the Sisters' caps and collars, as well as for recreation. After a day of teaching and religious devotions in one room, the only change came during dinner. At 5:00 p.m. they reassembled in the classroom, sisters and pupils together for reading, knitting and sewing. After supper came recreation in the same room again until the first bell rang for silence. At 8:30 p.m. prayers were said and all retired for the night. It was during recreation periods that Annette Lange gleefully entered into what gaiety there was. Only fear of her daughter's displeasure dampened her spirits somewhat.

On one occasion the young sisters were so engrossed in a Cuban dance Annette was performing for them that they failed to hear the "bell for silence." Amidst the laughter and the clapping, it was "Dede" who shouted the alarm at the top of her voice: "Mistress is coming!" The transgressors were properly

admonished by Mother Lange who allowed for no exceptions, not even her mother. Annette Lange died on July 3, 1837, two months after she received her First Communion.

The Oblates' most difficult time came in the 1840's with the threat of an impending directive to disband the order. Father Joubert had died in 1843, and the Sulpicians refused to continue direction of the order. Some of the Sisters left. Two of the very light-skinned sisters went to Michigan where they passed as white and established a new order, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. To protect their new identity they refused admission to an Oblate Sister from Baltimore who was obviously a Negro. The record tells us nothing of Sister Mary Lange's reaction to the Michigan incident, but it must have caused some consternation because one of those who founded the new order now was her first protege" Alneide Duchemin, now Sister Mary Theresa Maxis.

As women began to leave, once again a benefactor arrived in time to save the Oblate Sisters. The Reverend Thaddeus Anwander took over the direction in 1847 and breathed new life into the demoralized group. Within a decade, Sister Mary Lange, now as novice-mistress, was able to increase the Oblate membership to the point where they could attempt to branch out into new activities. In 1857 the Jesuit priests asked the Oblate Sisters to open a school for black children in South Baltimore. They did so but during the anti-Catholic riots, the Known-Nothings broke into the school building twice. Mayor Swann did nothing to stop the attacks and teaching had to be suspended. During the 1860's the Order opened more schools in Philadelphia and New Orleans, but they, too, were short lived. In 1864 the Sisters opened two schools for orphaned black children, The Blessed Peter Clavier School and the St. Benedict School, with Sister Mary as director. In 1869 a free school open to all religious groups and charging no tuition was established in Baltimore. The teachers in all these institutions and many others that sent requests for lay teachers were staffed by Oblates or St. Frances Academy graduates. In 1880 the first mission school was set up in St. Louis, Missouri.

In later years, Mother Lange served as novice-mistress (1851-1855) and then as local supervisor of St. Benedict's School in Fells Point (1863-1866). She returned to the mother house in 1866, and although she was in failing health, Mother Lange continued to remain active in the Order. The absence of water and kitchen facilities did not deter her from working in preparation for the opening of the new school on Chase Street in 1871. The new school was to be known as Saint Frances' Convent and Academy.

By the end of 1871, of the original four women, only Mother Lange remained. After the death of Sister Rose, her old friend, Mother Lange's physical condition seemed to worsen. Her eyesight became increasingly poor and she, who had always been a prodigious reader, could no longer read the books that had been so precious to her. On one occasion she apparently knelt too close to her candle while saying prayers and inadvertently set her cap

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lanova College, 1944). Other information can be found in Walter Charlton Hartridge, "The Refugees from the Island of St. Domingo in Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 38 (June 1943), 103-122 and Sister M. Immaculata, *Mother M. Theresa Maxis Duchemin* (1945).

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# Notable Maryland Worsen



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